

The Events Aboard Pueblo

By HEDRICK SMITH

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 3—The commander of the intelligence ship Pueblo and part of his crew are reported to have locked themselves into a compartment on the ship and worked for at least 45 minutes to destroy secret documents and sensitive equipment after North Korean sailors boarded the vessel 12 days ago.

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher and his men apparently worked furiously to destroy code books and equipment, many parts and pieces of which they tossed through a porthole. They fended off North Korean sailors as best they could and apparently used explosives of some sort to destroy some of the secret equipment.

Officials here believe that not all of the equipment was destroyed. The Government was reported to have changed some United States Navy codes immediately as a result.

This dramatic story of the Pueblo's final resistance to capture has been pieced together from several reliable sources, including members of Congress who have been briefed at the highest levels of government.

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These sources reported that there was a "considerable gap of time" between the moment when the ship's skipper radioed that North Koreans were boarding his vessel and when he sent his last message, saying he had to get off the air.

The full story of what happened in this interval when the lightly armed electronic intelligence ship was seized last Jan. 23 and escorted by North Korean patrol boats into the port of Wonsan remains an official secret. But some details of the Pueblo's final hour at sea are coming to light.

The picture that has been pieced together thus far indicates, much more so than the Government's initial reports did, that Commander Bucher and his crew acted with dispatch and heroism once they realized that the ship was going to be seized by the North Koreans.

Government officials report that until the North Koreans actually boarded the vessel, Commander Bucher apparently had assumed that his vessel was merely undergoing harassment of the sort that other electronic intelligence ships had undergone previously.

From the point of boarding on, this is the general outline of the events that has emerged from the Administration's briefings of members of Congress on the episode. Specific details have varied, however, depending on the source:

As the North Koreans scrambled aboard, the Pueblo sent a message to the effect that she was being seized and that her crew was proceeding to destroy codes, classified papers, and highly sensitive electronic gear to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.

Like all such intelligence ships, the Pueblo had rigid standing orders to destroy materials and equipment when in serious trouble. But informed

officials reported that the ship had not been fully equipped with built-in destructive mechanisms for all of her highly secret electronic gear.

Intelligence ships are supposed to have some type of incendiary detonating device so that if the vessel is about to fall into enemy hands, "you push two buttons and all they get is a mass of melted metal," as one source put it. But this source and others indicated that since there were not enough automatic destruction devices, the crew had to use its ingenuity.

Commander Bucher and other crew members took some of the ship's code books and other classified material and equipment into an armored deckhouse before the North Koreans actually boarded the vessel.

They locked themselves in the deckhouse and possibly in other compartments trying to destroy as much as they could. They ripped up secret papers and tossed bits and pieces out the portholes as the Pueblo was being taken into port.

Some sources said that the crew apparently had to use a makeshift explosive to destroy or damage some of their equipment. Several sources speculated that hand grenades and possibly incendiary devices or even sledge hammers might have been used.

At one point after the North Koreans boarded the vessel, the Pueblo messaged that one man had been severely injured. Officials here have surmised that this was either the crewman later reported by diplomatic channels to have died or the one, mentioned in the Pueblo's own message, whose leg was blown off.

Government officials have guessed that this injury came in the process of destroying equipment.

A later message from the Pueblo said that three men were "wounded," Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, was reported to have suggested in briefings to members of Congress that this description apparently was military parlance, meaning wounded in enemy action. General Wheeler was said to have contrasted this with the word "injured" used for the earlier incident.

There are differing versions of the Pueblo's final message, which was sent, according to the Pentagon, at 12:32 A.M. Eastern standard time, Jan. 23—47 minutes after the Pueblo radioed that she was being seized. The Government's initial statements on the incident said

simply that the Pueblo had radioed finally that she was "going off the air." According to some sources, however, Government officials later said that the final message was: "Send help. These guys mean business."

Still a third version was that the final call was: "I got to go off the air, good-by."

In reports to members of Congress, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was said to have expressed complete confidence in Commander Bucher. But some members of Congress got the impression that the State Department did not concur wholeheartedly.

Top Administration officials were said to have explained that the reason the Pueblo had not been given escort ships or air cover for protection was the fear that this would provoke an incident.

This was the gist of Secretary McNamara's comments to newsmen last Thursday in response to criticism from Richard M. Nixon, the former Vice President.

Mr. Nixon, endorsing President Johnson's efforts to obtain the release of the Pueblo's 82-man crew, said at a news conference at Manchester, N.H., that it was "simply unthinkable" that a ship like the Pue-

blo, carrying only two .50-caliber machine guns as armament, had been sent so close to the North Korean coast without protective escorts.

Mr. McNamara said that it would have been unthinkable to provide escorts because this would have amounted to provocative action that might have led to "firefights."

Although the Administration has held extensive briefings for a considerable number of members of Congress, some senators are reported to have pressed for still further details.

During secret testimony on the defense budget last week, Secretary McNamara and Gen-

eral Wheeler were reported to have provided the Senate Armed Services Committee with the complete file of the Pueblo's outgoing messages during her seizure, but not the messages being sent at that time to the Pueblo from American naval headquarters.

Some senators were said to be eager to get these messages as well, in order to investigate further the question of why the Pueblo was not sent assistance by other American or allied forces in the region.

"This was a national disaster," one Congressional source said, "and we want to know what the heck took place."